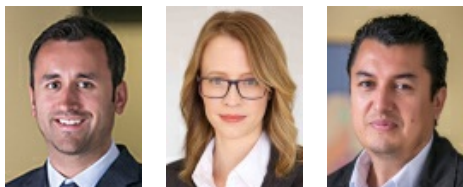


# The COVID-19 pandemic has changed work and commuting in Los Angeles for good



*The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way we work, with working from home – or teleworking – now commonplace for office workers. In new research, [Fynnwin Prager](#), [Mohja Rhoads](#), and [Jose Martinez](#) examined the practice in Los Angeles, finding that for workers and businesses, the benefits appear to have outweighed some of the potential downsides. They also write that the changes to the way people commute means that Los Angeles' transport systems will have to adjust to these new patterns, and that there will be continuing implications for social equity between wealthier and white workers and low-income and minority workers that will need to be explored further.*

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Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, working from home – or teleworking – has become commonplace in a way that would have been unthinkable only a few months earlier. In early 2020, only 7 percent of US workers had [access to teleworking](#). The pandemic changed everything. Telework rates across the US jumped to [45-56 percent](#). Economic shutdowns to non-essential businesses across the country had forced organizations to move beyond their earlier resistance and transition quickly to new modes of working. Telework gave many businesses the option to [remain operational while supporting public health measures](#), an important [resilience strategy](#).

The sudden and substantial increase in telework during the COVID-19 pandemic was particularly interesting to our research team, as we had just recently finished a study examining flexible workplace trends in the South Bay region of Los Angeles. [Our pre-pandemic study](#) was funded by the California State University Transportation Consortium and the [South Bay Workforce Investment Board](#) and focused on the barriers to flexible workplace expansion. Before the pandemic, telecommuting was limited in Los Angeles even though it was home to some of the worst traffic congestion in the US. Los Angeles was once a leader in telecommuting program experimentation in the 1990s, through advocates such as [Jack Nilles](#) (who coined the term). We figured that Los Angeles was a place ripe for the adoption of flexible workplace practices given that technical advances in the past decade made working from anywhere more feasible than ever. We also understood that flexible workplace arrangement increased productivity and enhanced work/life balance. However, [full-time telework rates were around 5 percent prior to the pandemic, while part-time teleworkers were around 15 percent](#). Our pre-pandemic focus groups and interviews found that a combination of occupational constraints and [managerial and executive resistance](#) were the reason behind such low adoption rates.

## The transition to teleworking during the pandemic

The shift to teleworking during the COVID-19 pandemic gave us an opportunity to follow-up on our previous research and to conduct interviews and analyze further data to explore how workers and organizations were managing the transition, and what the future might hold for regional work and commute practices.

Our interviews with executives, managers, and staff at South Bay organizations conducted during the COVID-19 shutdown period confirmed some of the [benefits of telework](#). Most workers, though not all, experience productivity improvements, some of which was due to time saved from not commuting. Reduced commuting also had a significant impact on [freeway congestion](#) and [pollution](#) in Los Angeles. Some organizations were also able to reduce costs for office space. On the flip side, many workers struggled with achieving a [work-life balance](#) because work was infiltrating home and managing childcare during this period, especially as many schools (kindergarten and above) in the Los Angeles region were [closed for almost a year](#). Organizations also faced challenges in rolling out IT hardware and software, network connectivity, and manager training.



"Our findings suggest that telework and other flexible workplace practices were unlikely to return to pre-pandemic levels after public health orders are removed."

*The COVID-19 pandemic has changed work and commuting in Los Angeles for good* write Fynnwin Prager, Mohja Rhoads, and Jose Martinez.

[blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog)

*Photo by Sigmund on Unsplash*

While experiences were mixed, our findings suggest that telework and other flexible workplace practices were unlikely to return to pre-pandemic levels (meaning little adoption) after public health orders are removed. [We expected many changes to stay in place.](#) [Workplace cultures appear to have shifted in lasting ways.](#) Pre-pandemic barriers to expansion of telework such as executive and managerial resistance appeared to be driven by concern about the costs of transition and a lack of confidence in their employees to maintain productivity and avoid distractions. The COVID-19 shutdowns forced many organizations to make these transitions instantly, and test whether telework worked for them. Each organization is unique, but enough appear to have benefitted from lower office rental and operating costs, lower travel times, and improved worker recruitment and retention. And these benefits appear to have outweighed some of the potential downsides, which may have been heightened during the pandemic, such as increased worker isolation, internal conflicts (which may be less easily resolved when not in person), and lower innovation through collective face-to-face problem solving.

## What greater teleworking means for commuting and social equity

Our research has implications for the future of telework and its impacts on transport policy. Regional transport systems will have to adjust to these new commuting patterns. Increases in telework means a temporary reduction in solo car travel, with additional benefits for congestion and pollution. However, the pandemic also saw significant reductions in public transit, partly due to public wariness of virus spread. If public transit usage continues to stay lower, this could impact a system in Los Angeles which is both adding significant light rail capacity and experiencing declining ridership. Increased telework usage also enabled many to move further afield to suburban and rural areas in the Los Angeles region and beyond which might spur more travel. [As research has shown](#), commuting fewer days but over greater distances can lead to increased vehicle miles traveled and emissions, especially when previously daily office trips were "chained" with travel to grocery stores and other errands.

There are also important implications with respect to social equity that need to be explored further. Our research confirmed prior pre-pandemic findings that teleworkers were more likely to be [wealthy, white, and more senior within organizations](#). When we add to this that COVID-19 disproportionately affected low-income and minority communities in terms of health outcomes and unemployment, this suggests while some privileged workers were able to benefit from the safety and job security of telework, those from poor and minority communities were left with tough choices. While more workers can now experience the benefits of telework and other flexible workplace practices, inequalities are likely to remain.

More recent research by [our colleagues at CSU Dominguez Hills](#) has looked at the broader context for California. We use multiple methods to look at the implications of the pandemic on telework across the State of California and for transport systems, emissions, land use, and employment. This is also funded by the CSU Transportation Consortium and will be available shortly through the Mineta Transportation Institute.

- This article is based on the paper, '[The COVID-19 economic shutdown and the future of flexible workplace practices in the South Bay region of Los Angeles County](#)' in *Transport Policy*.

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Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of USAPP – American Politics and Policy, nor the London School of Economics.

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Fynnwin Prager is Associate Professor of Public Administration and Co-Director of the South Bay Economics Institute at CSU Dominguez Hills. His research looks at the economics and policy of disasters, as well as regional economic and transportation systems. He has co-authored the books *Terrorism: An International Perspective* with C. Gus Martin and *Economic Consequence Analysis of Disasters – The E-CAT Software Tool* with Adam Rose and colleagues.



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José N Martínez is Associate Professor of Economics and Co-Director of the South Bay Economics Institute at CSU Dominguez Hills. His latest research looks at regional economic policies and the implications of pandemic news on financial markets volatility.